

By STUART EARP: Wycombe Wanderers 0, Tilbury 0

WYCOMBE Wanderers' desperate need for a goalscoring forward was emphasised once again on Saturday when they were held to a 0-0 draw by Tilbury in Division One of the Rothmans Isthmian League.

This was the Blues' third successive draw against a top club at Loakes Park which means that they have dropped six home points from a possible nine. That sort of form doesn't win championships and if Wycombe are to stand any chance of taking the title they must find a new forward. Clearly the players manager Ted Powell has available to fill the front positions cannot do the job on their own.

Wycombe's lack of finish on Saturday brought frustration for the manager, players and supporters who saw at least half a dozen goal chances wasted. It must have been particularly galling for the back four players who once again held the team together.

Outstanding in this department was Alan Phillips, who played his best game of the season. His only mistake was to send a powerful header over the crossbar when a goal would have earned him a 10-star rating. But in front of the defence there were few successes. Mick Holifield worked hard while Howard Kettleborough went closer than most to breaking the deadlock.

The Blues can point to a number of excuses. The pitch was difficult after Friday's torrential rain while there was a comparative 'stranger' in midfield, Graham Mackenzie coming back from college in place of the injured Howard Kennedy. Gavin Fraser, a more obvious choice, was due to play for Borough Road College on Saturday and was therefore thought to be unavailable. When the college game was called off, manager Powell decided to stick by Mackenzie having brought him back specifically to play. Dylan Evans came in for another casualty Peter Cruse while Tony Horseman was sub.

It is also fair to say that the run of the ball never went in Wanderers' favour but one cannot excuse their lack of finish in front of goal that should have sewn up a comfortable double over Tilbury, whose draw was their seventh in 12 games. The Blues, meanwhile, have scored only four goals in their last five outings which is just not good enough.

Tilbury deserve credit for a solid defensive performance although one or two of their tackles hardly impressed the 1,100 crowd. In the end, however, they could easily have snatched a late goal which would have made a nonsense of the general run of play.

One of the main stumbling blocks for Wycombe was goalkeeper Barry Willson who started unsteadily but grew in confidence to make a string of excellent saves. He was in action as early as the second minute tipping Kettleborough's header away for a corner. John Maskell was not to be outdone, however, and his eighth minute stop from Barry Lock saved some embarrassment in the back four, whose marking on that occasion was extremely poor.

Right back Paul Birdseye

made use of every opportunity to come forward and got in two strikes in six minutes, the first going wide, and the second deflected past an upright by Jerry Sullivan.

But as those early attacks petered out so Wanderers' confidence began to drain away. There were obvious problems up front where Ian Pearson, two goal hero last week, just couldn't get going while the passing in midfield was particularly poor.

Nevertheless, chances were still created and some great work by Evans almost brought a goal in the 31st minute. He robbed Willson as he rolled the ball before taking a kick and his cross was headed only inches over by Phillips. But the best chance of the half came five minutes before the interval when Pearson ran 30 yards to set the ball up for Evans. With the goal yawning in front of him, Dylan hooked the ball high over the top from eight yards.

Three early second half attacks soon emphasised that this just wasn't to be Wycombe's day. Evans saw a header cleared off the line by Ted Majaram and a minute later Kettleborough powered a header over Willson but onto the crossbar. From the resulting corner, Kettleborough got up again but headed just wide.

Still Wycombe strove forward but the lack of aggression inside the penalty area was there for all to see when John Priestley's 60th minute cross just begged to be put home but neither Kettleborough nor Mackenzie could oblige.

SWERVING DRIVE

Tilbury's forwards were getting little chance from the home back four but dangerman Mitch Mitchell almost surprised

Maskell with a swerving drive in the 64th minute. Mitchell, wanted by several league clubs, had a difficult time against the hard tackling Birdseye who eventually forced the West Indian to switch wings.

Willson dived bravely at Pearson's feet to block a certain goal before Tony Horseman replaced Kettleborough, much to the disapproval of the crowd. The manager explained afterwards that the supply of crosses to Kettleborough had dried up but it seemed to me that Wycombe missed their target man in the last quarter, especially as Horseman looked totally out of sorts.

Twice in the closing stages, Holifield's pace and aggression sent him racing past defenders but instead of crossing the ball he tried for near post shots and both were blocked. Tilbury also had a couple of late chances, once when Maskell miskicked to Billy Heal.

But it was Wanderers who nearly had the final say when Priestley won the ball in midfield and set up a chance for Mackenzie. 'Jock' struck his shot well but Willson launched himself to hold the stinging drive.

With Dagenham and Enfield both winning on Saturday the gap between the second and third placed clubs has widened to five points. If Wycombe are to catch up they must start putting the goals away before it is too late.

WYCOMBE: J. Maskell; P. Birdseye, K. Mead, A. Phillips, R. Davies; G. Mackenzie, J. Priestley; M. Holifield; D. Evans, H. Kettleborough (sub A. Horseman 74 mins), D. Evans.

TILBURY: B. Willson; J. Lewis, K. Russell, D. Barnett, E. Majaram; J. Sullivan, B. Lock (sub W. Heal 38 mins), J. Worrall; N. Smith, S. Scudder, M. Mitchell.

Referee: R. Sibley (Reading).

Attendance: 1,100.